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U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk is pushing legislation he says would ease prices at the pump for Chicago-area drivers.

With motorists paying upward of \$2.50 per gallon in some areas, the Highland Park Republican is backing several pieces of legislation he says are necessary to end fuel monopolies and reduce America's dependence on foreign crude oil.

"The prices are rising and we need to get something going now," Kirk said at a press conference Monday.

Kirk said House Bill 1493 would help break up regional fuel monopolies. The Chicago area is under a refinery stronghold in which only one type of fuel made by only 8 percent of the country's refineries is allowed to be sold, Kirk said.

Because gasoline cannot legally be transported and sold from one region to another, any decrease in production can cause gas prices to rise sharply.

"If there is a supply problem, motorists are at the mercy of these local fuel monopolies," Kirk said.

Executive Vice President Bill Fleischli of the Illinois Petroleum Marketers Association agrees something must be done.

"We support anything that will promote a more universal product for the state of Illinois," Fleischli said. The association represents 3,500 of Illinois' 5,000 fueling stations.

In a 300-mile radius from St. Louis to Chicago, 12 different grades of gas and four different types of diesel fuel are produced, Fleischli said. The same fuel made for St. Louis is not eligible for Chicago.

Kirk said he would like to see the system changed to a national system that creates full competition and promotes fuel refinery expansion.

“There hasn’t been a new refinery built in this country since 1976,” Kirk said.

In 1981, there were more than 350 refineries operating in the country. That has dropped to 153, according to Kirk.

Kirk also backs legislation designed to help reduce fuel consumption. He said he plans to back House Bill 626 to extend tax credits to owners of hybrid and alternative-fuel-consuming vehicles. Without the bill, the \$2,000 tax credit will drop to \$500 in 2006 and zero in 2007.

He also would like to see legislation passed to raise the corporate average fuel economy standards from 20.7 miles per gallon to 33 miles per gallon by 2014. Advancements in alternative fuels and mass transit will help reach that goal, he said.

Although this will not immediately help to reduce gas prices, it will lay the groundwork for creating one clean fuel standard and reducing the country’s reliance on foreign oil, Kirk said.